

From: Roger Gough, Leader of the Council
Mike Hill, Cabinet Member for Community and Regulatory Services
David Whittle, Director of Strategy, Policy, Relationships and Corporate Assurance

To: **Cabinet- 9th December 2021**

Subject: **Key Decision to adopt KCC's Civil Society Strategy**

Classification: Unrestricted

Future Pathway of Paper:

Electoral Division: Countywide- all divisions affected.

Summary:

KCC's Civil Society Strategy (CSS), will be a key strategy for the County Council and is a commitment under the Interim Strategic Plan. The CSS has undergone a 4-week consultation period; prior to this we undertook a 9-week consultation on the previous draft, which was written pre-Covid. The decision was taken to pause the development of the strategy, revise, and re-consult to reflect the impact of the pandemic.

The strategy has now been updated to reflect the insights gathered and this report provides an overview of the consultation, the feedback, and the subsequent changes to the final strategy to be adopted by Cabinet.

Recommendation(s):

For Cabinet to:

1. Agree the adoption of KCC's Civil Society Strategy
2. Agree that the infrastructure budget will be allocated in accordance with the strategy framework; any decisions on expenditure will be made by the relevant Cabinet Members
3. Agree to undertake appropriate Member engagement as we develop the plans for our infrastructure support.

1. Background

- 1.1 Kent County Council made a commitment to adopt a new Civil Society Strategy¹ (CSS) in 2019; the proposal for this came to Policy and Resources Cabinet Committee in November 2019 and formal consultation on the draft strategy began in February 2020, running until April. However, the events of the pandemic overtook this, and it was agreed to pause the final development of the strategy and concentrate on Covid response and recovery and to give time to reflect on the impact of the pandemic. Since this time, a great deal of work has taken place with the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) to improve

¹ By Civil society we mean all those individual, informal, and formal groups and organisations that operate outside of state control and for the primary purpose of social good.

partnership working and engagement and this development of the final strategy has been informed by that.

- 1.2 The decision to move to a Civil Society Strategy was informed partly by the publication of the first Government Civil Society Strategy, however, 'Civil Society' also allowed us to recognise the contribution of both the registered charities, social enterprises, and voluntary organisations but also the many informal groups and individual volunteers who play an important role in our communities. This also reflected the conversations we had with the sector since the publication of the VCS policy. We therefore took the decision in 2019 to broaden out the VCS policy into a new Civil Society Strategy, with the social sector at the core.

2. Context:

- 2.1 The Civil Society Strategy discharges the commitment made in the Interim Strategic Plan agreed by County Council on 10 December to support a strong Civil Society and the Voluntary sector as a core part of that. As detailed in the strategy we have put in place interim plans to support the social sector for this financial year (2021-22), but the strategy will provide the framework for our long-term infrastructure support.
- 2.2 The budget allocation for support is £700Kp.a. or £2.1m over the life of the strategy. The budget for the support is held by Strategy, Policy, Relationships and Corporate Assurance (SPRCA) as the strategy owners and is allocated from base budget and the Public Health budget, with a 50% split. Whilst both a Civil Society Strategy and infrastructure support offer to the VCS is not a statutory responsibility it remains a significant political priority that has only strengthened in the last year. The intention of our infrastructure support budget is to help to build a sustainable and resilient voluntary sector and civil society; given the challenges of the last 18 months and going forward this has become increasingly important. This funding is a contribution and is not intended to create dependency or dictate the direction of activity.
- 2.3 As set out in the strategy, we believe that the importance of this strategy has only grown in the last year. Not only because of the incredible response we have seen from our communities, voluntary organisations, and local people but because of the undeniable impact the pandemic has and will continue to have on us as individuals, communities and as organisations and the need to recognise and respond to that. We have reflected on the events of the last year and updated the strategy to respond to the challenges we have faced and will continue to face as we recover. The final strategy is provided in Annex 1 and an Executive Summary has been produced in Annex 2; we hope this will provide a useful reference document for the sector.

3 Consultation process

- 3.1 The consultation on the final strategy began on the 6th September and ran until the 3rd October and was undertaken as an online survey. Prior to this consultation we carried out a 9-week consultation on the original draft strategy back in February 2020 and we have taken the findings from both consultations to inform this final draft.
- 3.2 A VCS Recovery Cell was established during the pandemic as part of the Kent Resilience Forum architecture and the impact assessment and action plan developed by that group of VCS representatives (facilitated by KCC and Medway officers) was used to revise the strategy.

As set out in the strategy itself, since then we have established a VCSE Steering Group, which is made up of VCS representatives and is independent of KCC. We have worked

collaboratively with this group prior to the formal consultation to revise the strategy, sharing early drafts for comment and these discussions were reflected in the draft which we have consulted on. The feedback set out in this report therefore reflects a combination of all the consultation and engagement undertaken

- 3.3 It is worth reflecting on the considerable pressure organisations have faced over the last 18 months and to thank all those that have taken the time to respond to the most recent consultation. Whilst the number of responses to the second consultation was lower than we had hoped – 9 submissions, we widely circulated the strategy through the VCSE Steering Group (asking them to cascade), colleagues in KCC, District Councils and through social media. We believe this response reflects not only the demands on organisations at this time and their ability to partake but also that we had already consulted on the original draft when responses were much higher. Given we have worked alongside the sector to develop the strategy over the last year through our engagement channels and the responses to the consultation, we are confident that it has been well socialised and reflects both the needs of the sector and the relationship, which KCC is wanting to establish.

4. Main consultation findings

- 4.1 The findings from the consultation are summarised under each of the following headings and any subsequent changes to the strategy are provided. In addition, the consultation report, 'You said, we did' provided in Annex 3, sets out in more detail the responses and how these were used.

4.2 Demographics of respondents:

***Caveat:** The consultation was open to any organisation to respond and therefore not intended to be a representative survey of the sector. It was specifically targeted at VCSE organisations as opposed to the wider public.*

Over the course of the two formal consultations a total of 78 individual responses were received. This does not include the engagement undertaken with the VCSE Steering Group. Most responses (69%) were either from individuals responding on behalf of a registered charity, community group, social enterprise, or a trustee/volunteer.

4.3 Terminology

The shift to a Civil Society Strategy was intended to acknowledge the diversity in the social sector and that many organisations operating in our communities are not funded by KCC, may be very informal or comprise of just one or two individuals volunteering in their local area to do social good. The intention of this strategy was to move past a transactional relationship of the past, where primarily our strategic engagement was with those we have some funding arrangement with, to a wider relationship. This strategy acknowledges that most activities, which promote social good are not funded by KCC and yet play an important part in our communities but also that it is entirely appropriate that this activity, whilst important to the County Council, is independent.

We also took the decision, through engagement with the sector, to use the term 'social sector' rather than 'voluntary sector'. The sector had challenged, in particular the VCSE Steering group, the use of the term 'voluntary' and felt it sometimes undervalued the economic contribution the sector makes to the local economy and can give the impression the sector can exist on little or minimal funding.

4.3.1 Feedback and proposed changes

This use of terminology and the rationale was supported by the consultation responses, with most respondents across both consultations supporting the move to a 'civil society' strategy and with the use of the phrase 'social sector'. A small minority felt that it was difficult to know exactly what we meant by these terms and so we have added a more detailed section on terminology to be clear. Following feedback from Members at Policy and Resources Cabinet Committee we have also added 'VCSE' to our definitions. We also acknowledge that there will always be a range of terms used to describe the 'sector' and not all will agree with this use of language but for this strategy and the relationship it sets out, 'social sector' is the right term.

4.4 Challenges and opportunities facing the sector post Covid.

The strategy sets out the diverse ways the sector supports our communities, through both the People and Place chapters.

The strategy highlights the role of civil society in supporting people through both formal services, funded by KCC but also through the wider safety net it provides. It also recognises that the impact of Covid will see an increase in demand for this support and the challenges this may bring. It highlights the role of volunteers within our communities and the increasing role this informal infrastructure has played over the past 18 months, and the opportunities this could bring if we support or facilitate this 'social action' in our communities outside of a pandemic.

The Place section of the strategy highlights the role of the sector in building resilient communities and the range of ways that civil society supports our community assets, positive activities for young people and importantly the contribution it makes to our local economy.

The opportunities to work collaboratively in partnership with civil society to deliver services, develop innovative solutions to the challenges we collectively face and the need for this to be a key part of the place-based approach are set out. Whilst it is acknowledged that our infrastructure support, set out in Chapter 3 must help to enable this.

4.4.1 Feedback and proposed changes

The VCSE Steering group provided insights into the challenges facing the sector, whilst the action plan developed by the VCS Recovery Cell was also used to shape the revised strategy and direction of these sections. Therefore, the draft was informed by first-hand experience of the sector, and we are pleased that the consultation responses supported the direction set out and found that it accurately reflected the challenges facing the sector post Covid. However, some respondents felt that the opportunities to work more collaboratively could be further emphasised and we have now set out in the strategy our commitment to working more collaboratively with the sector through our engagement and in our commissioning approach. We have also recognised in the strategy the need to work with partners as we look to take forward this work and how we can facilitate engagement and collaboration at the local level. Some respondents felt that our aspiration to value the sector as an equal partner could be strengthened and we have now reflected this in our aims and objectives and in our approach to engagement.

4.5 Support to the Sector

Alongside this strategy is a budget commitment over the 3 years, which will be used to deliver infrastructure support to the sector through the strategy framework. A summary of

how this support will be provided and what it will focus on is provided in the Executive summary but is set out in more detail in Chapter 3 of the Strategy.

Objectives of KCC support for the social sector:

- *Establishing a strategic relationship with the social sector- so that it can effectively engage and influence.*
- *Enabling a sustainable, diverse, and independent social sector in Kent, which can grow and develop.*
- *Enabling a coordinated, properly resourced, and sustainable volunteering system across the county.*
- *Creating the right conditions for small community organisations to respond to communities' needs and for communities to be empowered.*

4.5.1 Engagement

A strategic relationship through more open and honest dialogue is a key part of our support offer. As set out in the strategy we have established a VCS Strategic Partnership Board (KCC, district, NHS and VCSE representation) and an independent VCSE Steering Group. As part of our infrastructure offer, we propose to evolve the VCSE Steering Group into a more formal representative body and to look at other ways to improve collaboration and engagement with the sector. This will mean ensuring that there is transparency in the membership and that the groups are accessible and visible to the wider sector. This will also include working with partners such as the NHS to create more meaningful engagement channels and considering how this links up with forums at the local level for example, through district councils.

4.5.2 Feedback and proposed changes

In the first consultation the majority of respondents agreed that more open dialogue was needed, which did not purely focus on commissioning and funding. Since then, we have as stated improved our engagement through the now established VCSE Steering Group and Partnership Board, which is allowing a flow of information, collaboration and partnership working.

Responses from the second consultation and discussions with the Steering Group showed the introduction of these engagement channels as a positive step; however, not all were aware of the Steering Group and therefore more work is required to ensure that this forum is accessible and established as a trusted route for sector engagement- this means that the membership must be transparent. This is recognised in the strategy and will be taken forward as we develop our infrastructure.

The majority agreed with an independent Steering Group, nominated or elected by the sector but stated that how this works in practice is truly independent and with the right expertise is a challenge. These challenges are recognised in the strategy and will be taken forward as we work to evolve and improve the model alongside the sector.

Respondents also felt that more engagement mechanisms to support collaboration were most likely needed. We have updated the strategy to ensure it seeks to address this and as part of our support offer, we will evolve our engagement alongside our partners such as the NHS and district councils to ensure that we are working with other engagement channels and not duplicating.

4.6 Business Support

Access to appropriate business support such as developing funding strategies organisational plans, a digital approach and governance advice will be a key plank of our support offer. For 21/22 this will be delivered through the Strategic Recovery Fund as set out and the impact monitoring from this fund will help to inform how we take this forward and the funding mechanism that will be used.

4.6.1 Feedback and proposed changes

In both consultations access to financial advice and support was considered most important. There were mixed responses regarding access to business support, where some felt able to access the right support whilst others had not been able to. The main barrier to accessing support across both consultations was the ability to fund it alongside time constraints.

KCC's commitment in the strategy to contribute to business support, initially through the Strategic Recovery Fund, is intended to tackle the challenges organisations face in availability of funds to buy in expertise but also free up time of those running the charity by using outside support and expertise.

We also received feedback that access to good advice for new organisations to start up and develop was important, especially as we have seen new organisations emerge during the pandemic, which will look to continue. This type of governance advice and organisational support will be a feature of our 'business support' offer and is included in our Strategic Recovery Fund.

4.7 Volunteering

Volunteers, or 'social action' are an intrinsic part of the strategy and mentioned throughout in the many roles they play in our communities, often underpinning the many groups and organisations that make up civil society.

The need for a well-resourced and co-ordinated volunteering network across the County was highlighted in the VCS Recovery Cell action plan. The Volunteer Centres provided advice and support to hubs supporting those that were shielding, whilst continuing to co-ordinate those that volunteered within their local communities throughout the pandemic. They also supported volunteers who were not able to volunteer for health reasons; ensuring they remained connected and engaged.

The strategy therefore sets out a specific commitment to supporting volunteer infrastructure as part of our support offer. We have committed in the strategy and already funded a volunteering infrastructure pilot for this financial year, which will be evaluated to inform our future support for volunteering.

4.7.1 Feedback and proposed changes

This area of support has been developed as a direct result of the pandemic and from priorities set out in the VCS Recovery Cell action plan and informed by engagement with the VCSE Steering Group.

Responses to the consultation welcomed this addition to the strategy and most respondents reported they had accessed support to recruit volunteers, had concerns about recruiting and retaining volunteers in the future and identified a need for advice and support to assist them in doing so. As a result, no further changes were made to this section of the strategy.

4.8 Creating the right conditions for small organisations to respond to communities needs

The strategy recognises the important role of grassroots organisations in supporting our local communities, providing activities for young people and in running many community assets. It is this social infrastructure, which has provided resilience over the last 18 months and will continue to do so. The support offer therefore includes funding to support this infrastructure in a way that is sustainable and does not seek to formalise or control local projects. We have funded a 2-year pilot of Crowdfunding – Crowdfund Kent to support locally led and locally supported projects and community groups. This will be evaluated to inform our future support to meet his objective.

4.8.1 Feedback and proposed changes

During the first consultation organisations reported the need for access to grants for small organisations as the most important priority for infrastructure support. At the time we were exploring options such as Crowdfunding to enable this and felt it was important that the mechanism did not create formal arrangements with the Council and was sustainable, drawing in funding from various sources not just KCC. Since then, we have established Crowdfund Kent to support local organisations and community projects and the strategy has been updated to reflect this.

4.9 Fair Funding

Of course, there will be financial challenges ahead, but fair funding practices can help to support the social sector even through uncertain times; our approach to commissioning and funding helps to set a tone for our relationship and partnership working with the sector. Therefore, the strategy considers a ‘fair funding’ approach as a key part of our support offer; this is about transparency, accessibility, and proportionate processes.

The strategy recognises that there has been differing practice in the past with our grant funding, which we have addressed through the grant framework from 2015 and which has been slightly revised but reinforced in this strategy.

However, there remains some criticism from the sector in relation to elements of our commissioning and the challenges faced by the sector when either bidding for KCC services or when in receipt of funding under contract.

Through engagement with the VCSE Steering Group we have strengthened references to some of the challenges faced by the sector when delivering services under contract and the need to address these. These are well debated issues around sustainability and costs, which are not unique to Kent; however, the strategy commits to undertaking work to look at these issues in more detail alongside the sector, which will discharge the action from the VCS Recovery Cell. This will be part of the work we undertake to evolve our commissioning model to ensure it has a greater emphasis on locality and to look at how our commissioning can work with communities to build resilience and improve the focus on place.

VCSE Recovery Cell Action Plan, action 20: *Commissioning: review and reflect on service delivery models and the culture of commissioning - lessons learnt from COVID-19 to inform future strategy. Particularly consider the impact of a reduction in voluntary income during COVID-19 and the fragilities that has exposed e.g., issues around full cost recovery. Look at opportunities for more innovative, sustainable and flexible commissioning and service delivery. Treating the VCSE as an equal partner and involving the sector in discussions to improve and reform service delivery.*

5. Next steps

- 5.1 On decision to adopt the strategy an internal communication exercise will be undertaken to ensure that all KCC staff, are aware of the strategy and its implications for our relationship with and support for the social sector and civil society. We will also send out external communications and upload the strategy on Kent.gov to make partners and the social sector aware that the strategy is now adopted. The consultation report in Annex 3 'You said, we did' will be provided to all who registered to take part in the online consultation and to the VCSE Steering Group. and will be accompanied by the final strategy document when published on our website.
- 5.2 We will continue to review the support we have put in place such as the Crowdfunding pilot, Volunteering pilot and the Strategic Recovery Fund. The evaluation of each of these will be used to define the long-term arrangements for support underpinned by the strategy framework. The budget committed against this strategy to provide infrastructure support will be allocated accordingly in line with the evaluation findings. However, following discussions with Members at Policy and Resources Cabinet Committee we are also proposing to undertake appropriate Member engagement as we develop our infrastructure offer further. This will also ensure that Members can make organisations in their communities aware of the availability of this support.
- 5.3 As part of our infrastructure offer, we will also be reviewing our engagement mechanisms, namely the VCSE Steering Group alongside the Chair and the group members, over the next 6 months and will look to have refined these arrangements as a result by the start of the new financial year. We will ensure there is transparency around the membership of this group so that is accessible to the wider sector.
- 5.4 A report outlining our progress against the Measures of Success defined in the strategy will be brought to Cabinet and P&R Cabinet Committee by the end of 2022 as set out in the strategy. The information used to monitor progress will as set out in the model, be collated through partnership working; using a range of sources and the intelligence and insights of partners, the VCS Strategic Partnership Board will provide the mechanism for this.

Recommendations:

For Cabinet to:

1. Agree the adoption of KCC's Civil Society Strategy
2. Agree that the infrastructure budget will be allocated in accordance with the strategy framework any decisions on expenditure will be made by the relevant Cabinet Members
3. Agree to undertake appropriate Member engagement as we develop the plans for our infrastructure support.

6. Additional Documents:

Annex 1: Final Civil Society Strategy

Annex 2: Final Executive Summary

Annex 3: Consultation report – 'You said we did'

Annex 4: Proposed Record of Decision

7. Contact Details

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